

not
white

diversity in beginning design education



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PROCEEDINGS of the
20th National Conference on
the Beginning Design Student
Hampton University Department of Architecture

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Printed proceedings produced by Shannon Chance, Assistant Professor of Architecture, Hampton University.

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Published by:
Hampton University Urban Institute
Department of Architecture
Hampton University
Hampton, VA 23668
757-727-5440
fax 757-728-6680

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chance, Shannon
Not White: Diversity in Beginning Design Education
(Proceedings of the 20th National Conference on the Beginning Design Student)
compiled by Shannon Chance
1. Architecture - Diversity 2. Teaching - Architecture 3. Teaching - Diversity 4. Teaching - Design
5. Diversity - Design

ISBN 0-9785172-0-2

Noticing the Framework: Identity as Subject Matter

Crowded over, around, submerging and drowning the identities of our students is the multiple ways a person becomes misrepresented and misunderstood because of skin color, gender, geographical demographics or economic status. Minority students are especially vulnerable to being incorrectly 'identified.' Identity is distinct from autobiography or self portrait. The autobiography and self portrait often only promote guidelines for the student to reflect upon what they have been educated to see about himself or herself from the outside, rather than think about who they really are on the inside. The intention of my identity project, "The Sublime Chapeau," is intended to express the 'I' of each individual existence inspiring the student to explore their identity while working through basic Design principles. A Beginning Design project like this one allows students to peel beneath the onion of autobiographical circumstance, societal qualifiers related to race, and erroneous power structures. Students unearth and express their potential as it relates to core characteristics rather than arbitrary labels.

Art objects and architecture develop from the intrinsic motivation to order our interior or exterior environments. However profound and powerful work does not simply copy obvious patterns but reaches out for new combinations and iterations of visual symbols. Neo-Piagetian Robert Kegan's analysis of knowledge acquisition suggests that human development involves a succession of renegotiated balances. Kegan says the two greatest yearnings of human experience are the desire to preserve an independent boundary, and at the same time be included and accompanied. Minority students already facing societal barriers to inclusion and acceptance will find it doubly difficult to explore independent and innovative work in the studio classroom. However if creative achievement can be framed within the transformative power of investigating your true identity and not asking who you are for others, but who you are for yourself, it is possible create forms that are truly unique to the designer.

Creative activity is the forum for a constructive experience satisfying an individual's need for existential knowledge by providing operations that exert change and control over tensions felt and observed regarding the chaotic components of life. Beginning Design become a unique place to teach the non verbal skills required for the clear symbolic communication an artist or architect requires while providing the appropriate format for exerting reflective knowledge about the symbolic identity of the student. Assignments that guide students into experiences of asserting an identity that was previously subsumed by a non supportive societal structure can be very liberating.

Bakhtin writes the "gateway of the 'I' is located at the center not only of one's own existence but of language as well. This is because an intrinsic connection exists between the project of language and the project of selfhood: they both exist in order to mean. "Process Education" is a pedagogical model devoted to giving student's greater responsibility and ownership of their right to communicate and negotiate the assessment of their projects. Students develop the ability to impact the evaluation process of their projects and those of their peers through open communication dialogue and discussion while furthering developing the voice that expresses their core identity.

abstract
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Stephanie Bowman is Assistant Professor of Art and the Gallery Director at Pittsburg State University. She teaches 'flat' things in the Fall: 2D Foundations /Studio Printmaking and 'round' things in the Spring: 3D Foundations/Studio Sculpture. Bowman has articles published in numerous journals such as *Sculpture Magazine*, *Art Papers*, *Ceramics: Art and Perception* and *Ceramics Technical*. She is currently working on a large collaborative project with computer software artist Jeffrey Ventrella. This large multi media installation called *The Gene Pool* will exhibit at the Koehnline Gallery in Des Plaines, IL outside of Chicago in September 2005. More information about the project can be found at <http://www.ventrella.com/Tweaks/MandelTweaks/tweaks.html>.

Crowded over, around, submerging and drowning the identities of our students are the multiple ways a person becomes misrepresented because of skin color, gender, geographical demographics or economic status. We are born with a potential identity and in those early years are wide open to see the world and be one with the world accepting our place within it as natural and appropriate. However, day by day, says Douglas Harding, founder of the *Headless Way* philosophy, we are slowly educated to see ourselves as others reflect back to us what they think they see, or want to see. The role of cultural structure and relational roots has been central to recent debates in neurobiological and cognitive sciences examining what characteristics are innate and what is acquired. It is difficult to talk of identity without at the same time, referencing social structures and family relationships, or the familiar nature versus nurture. The *Not White Conference*, dedicated to understanding and increasing diversity in architectural and beginning design education, can consider research by Joe R. Fegan, Hernan Vera and Nikitah Imani. They report in the *Agony of Education* and discuss at length the degree to which black students feel marginalized from the interaction between white peers and white faculty members at predominantly white universities.¹ This paper will address the significance of assigning projects that allow a student to peel beneath the onion of autobiographical circumstances, racial qualifiers and erroneous power structures, to unearth and express their potential as it relates to their core characteristics and not arbitrary labels.

Central to research throughout *The Agony of Education* was the theme of black invisibility. White professors, students, staff members and administrators were not perceived as treating black students as complete human beings with distinctive talents, virtues, interests and problems. It is significant to note that identity is considered to be distinct from autobiography or the self portrait. Autobiography and self portrait often only promote guidelines for the student to reflect upon what they have been educated to see about themselves. Such projects only solidify the mythical self, rather than explore the real self. Jurgen Habermas suggests that so long as everyone's right of co-existence is clearly recognized a constructive democracy will be possible.² And although this may be true for a political reality it may not be true for the individual reality where there is a delicate balance between the ability to assert your own difference and as well, recognize or even embrace another opinion or perspective. Black students interviewed for *The Agony of Education* repeatedly talked about the painful effects of 'anome', which is where a person cannot trust the existing rules to be applied to themselves in the expected manner. A successful studio project creates circumstances where it is more difficult for a professor to form opinions about the student through the skewed lense of personal prejudice, cultural bias, or misplaced values and opinions.

It is easy to starve the original immense view of ourselves to one that is shrunken and limited. Circumstance and missed opportunity can keep one from discovering or remembering who you really are. College is a time to re-awaken or take charge of defining your natural and original self. However, Neo-Piagetian Robert Kegan's analysis of knowledge acquisition suggests that human development involves a succession of renegotiated balances. Kegan says that the two greatest yearnings of human experience are the desire to preserve an independent boundary, and at the same time be included and accompanied.³ Because minority students already face illogical but real societal barriers to inclusion and acceptance they will find it that much more difficult to explore independent and innovative work in the studio classroom. However if creative achievement can be framed within the transformative power of investigating your true identity and not asking who you are for others, but who you are for yourself, it is possible for an the instructor to create guidelines which will provide a protective framework for the student to move in and explore and it becomes possible for unique, powerful and expressive forms to emerge.

Modern social sciences have advanced the notion that an individual and a social system make up each other in a reciprocal fashion and a person becomes aware of themselves as a subject through his or her active interchange with the environment and the resources and constraints offered by it. When a student becomes identified according to a label such as race, gender or status they become an object and not a subject. Because making art and architecture develops out of an intrinsic motivation to order our interior or exterior environments, a successful project will carry within it mechanisms to merge the subject/object split. Therefore, obvious but erroneous patterns of identification are not emulated or repeated but profound, powerful and new identities free from self conscious labeling emerge in new combinations and iterations of visual symbols. In terms of individual development art fulfills two simultaneous cognitive functions. On the one hand, "it provides reflexive knowledge about the inner state of an individual and gives the artist symbolic means to master inarticulate conflicts."⁴ And at the same time it provides constructive knowledge about a person's need to affect the environment which satisfies significant existential needs to "confirm a person's existence as an autonomous agent."⁵

The existential needs of a person are as real as any physiological or biological need and function within the framework of an individual becoming aware of himself or herself. Existential needs are a function of the self reflective cognitive structure hardwired into the human condition. Art therefore has an adaptive function equivalent to the role of reason. Nietzsche suggested that "art and reason function simultaneously to grasp given amounts of reality and provide mastery over it in order to feel less controlled by elements of life that cannot be understood or easily explained."⁶ The power of art is its ability to provide novel concepts about the human condition for which reason alone cannot answer. The young artist is given an opportunity to comment upon and create visual models for their developing pattern of experience. However, consciousness is the basis for how human beings construct a cognitive understanding of the world. Individuals understand line, space, mass, or form through the bodily and sensory negotiation of living. Pedantic and obscure lectures inventing a false complexity about known concepts such as 'line' or 'value', can erode a student's interest in the creative experience and career choice. However, Basic Design principles are fundamental to symbolic visual language,

and before students can be trusted with creating a tower, they must be able to understand a bridge, or at least swim across the moat. Projects that provide a framework to express basic ideas and opinions about identity become a significant place for the minority student, or any student to work out an understanding of themselves and design principles at the same time.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes “The person who can effectively code experience in visual media replays at the individual level the process that artistic cognition serves at the level of species adaptation.”⁷ According to Csikszentmihalyi the dynamics of artistic activity is a process by which the individual:

- 1) experiences a conflict in perception, emotion or thought: assigned or ascribed,
- 2) formulates a problem articulating the previously inarticulated conflict,
- 3) express the problem in visual form,
- 4) succeeds in resolving the conflict (puzzle) through symbolic means. thereby achieving a new emotional and cognitive balance,
- 5) The aim of the creative act is not to reduce a drive in order to restore a previous equilibrium but to reach out for a new one.⁸

The possibility of allowing the artmaking experience to assist in the rediscovery of your true identity is significant and should be given greater credibility in the culture at large while University programs functioning to develop artists and architects should recognize the overall potential of the studio experience. Studio projects posing questions in such a way that students come to consider the components of self that the world is seeing: while comparing this with the components of self that are being covered over by circumstances of time, culture and place, is a significant way to empower students to think about whether or not the life they are living is their own.

To acknowledge that “human beings are meaning seekers”⁹ places the quest for understanding of identity within the framework of creative endeavor and if we consider the different approaches adopted in creative problem solving the role of intuition is of significant interest. Intuitive experience embodies the non-scientific experience that art making is, but too often the analytical approach of idea making is upheld in the academic setting, because the scientific approach is awarded so much prestige in our culture at large. And although analysis and development are important skills required to complete and finalize forms “an intuitive approach to problem solving does not make a pedagogical curtsy to understanding in order to induce a successful performance, but is instead is part of a larger struggle to gain deeper insight.”¹⁰ Creative problem solving should not begin with reasoned analysis because it tends to lead students steadily away from the objects and ideas they should be attending to. Intuition and exploring ideas through building maquettes, handling materials, or thinking through your fingers can link the maker to the potential object in such a way that the first layers of meaning become clear as the sensory encounter and subjective responses occur from interacting with the form. “One of the great findings of cognitive science is that our ideas are shaped by our bodily experiences—not in any simpleminded one to one way but indirectly through the grounding of our entire conceptual system in everyday life.”¹¹ Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer considered the content of all intuitions to be “partly determined by dynamic factors (what he called the Will) and hence, by the quest for meaning.”¹² He felt it was not the case that intuitions receive representations and then pass that on to understanding, and then understanding extracts objects from these representations, but the “search for meaning pervades the entire sequence of object, exploration, discovery response and understanding.”¹³ Schopenhauer regarded the Will as a thing in itself. This ‘Will is in us all and can be felt and “is ultimately and basically real, and is as directly known as anything tangible or felt.”¹⁴ The “Will” is not to be regarded as pure knowledge or pure affect, but something that is beyond both and manifested as ‘constructive knowledge.’¹⁵

People operating in an intuitive mode are clearly using concepts in order to communicate but they return again and again to the object. The challenge becomes allowing students access to their intuition without controlling the outcome. We hope for insight inherent in the creative dynamics of the teaching experience to move their work forward to a greater depth and maturity without deadening their enthusiasm with the words, “that’s not right.” Sometimes the solutions come as pure feeling imbuing creative activity with significant clarity and in this circumstance the teacher’s primary task is to establish thinking and help it maintain its forward moving direction.¹⁶ The instructor strives to ‘engage the Will’ and



Figures 1-5: Student examples of The Sublime Chapeau.



win the initial commitment of the student to solving the problem embedded within the assignment. The commitment is required to release the intuitive power of the student and not split their intention so they are found asking “why am I doing this...” In a genuine intuitive mode consciousness is fastened upon the object of interest.¹⁷ If the object is an object of knowledge, our purpose is to see it clearly and understand it, and its possibilities in relation to other objects of knowledge, and know this will lead to greater awareness for the student and culture at large.

For the student asked to explore their essential identity in the assignment *The Sublime Chapeau* (aka Heidegger Hats), the problem to be solved is how to extract meaning from materials and structure in such a way that the finished form is the conceptual metaphor as the embodiment of identity. The intention of a project like *The Sublime Chapeau* is to invite expression of the “I” of individual identity. I recently learned that Heidegger was a member of the Nazi party. This was shocking news and although his philosophy and theory inspires the essential component of the project, the name has been changed to *The Sublime Chapeau*, as I had extracted Heidegger’s theory on the ‘transformational passage’ from a book called *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*. The concept being considered was what Heidegger called the ‘transformational passage’. The transformational passage occurs within a material when the material becomes more than what it is because of the conceptual intention of the maker, and what the new form represents even though the material itself has not changed and is often a very familiar, almost mundane material. Heidegger writes about how ‘The Temple’ exists as a temple while being made from the rock substance on which it stands. He explains how majesty is found in relationship to its location and is more profound because it is made from rocks extracted from the place being honored.¹⁸

For *The Sublime Chapeau*, students are challenged to extract out of materials inherent qualities to identify what they seek to describe about their core self. Students use one material to form the structure and are allowed one joining technique. The structure is covered with a skin, and again they are allowed one material and one joining technique. The second material is described as a skin and not a covering because skin is integral to a form while a covering remains external and additional. Restricting the variety of materials and joining techniques encourages deeper problem solving skills. Students must deconstruct the nature of the materials to find the most amount of information possible. In this way, everything we observe is creating associations that will inform what the viewer will consider to be essential about the student who made the hat. Class critiques may involve writing paragraphs about what we believe the artist is trying to describe about themselves. For example:

- 1) the two ‘headed’ hat is the psychologist taking an art class, recognizing the dual nature to his vocational aspirations. The skin is multi-colored bark attached in a camouflage like pattern identifying the way he has hidden his true interest.
- 2) the young woman whose opinions are bravely vocalized on matters of injustice she holds close to her heart: the small close form is the metaphor for her heart, the cork tabs become the metaphor for the power she has to be vocal which at times must be insulated or stopped.
- 3) milk cartons dipped in melted wax crayons are specific to this student’s desire to be playful and acknowledging the child’s dependence on milk for growth and development.
- 4) the owl form becomes Kale’s way of identifying the kind of work and thinking he was doing, commuting back and forth from school in the night and early morning: while repeatedly being visited by an owl. The sweater *skin* addressed Kale’s interest in clothing and acknowledged how he had begun identifying himself through clothing.

The quest for understanding within this project requires student to be gently and firmly moved forward into extracting new associations about familiar materials because of the ideas that need to be expressed in relationship to presenting their identity. As well, the student is challenged to extract methods of construction from within the material itself, further binding them to unusual and unorthodox methodologies. The most successful *Sublime Chapeau* will carry within its form and function a paradox unearthed by the students quest for creating new associations within the conceptual metaphors extracted from the material in relationship to the ideas that need to be expressed. It is vital that the student’s choice, his or her center of engagement, not be demeaned nor that the thinking generated by it be derailed. The student must undergo the consequences of planning and implementation, if one is to bring any meaningful evaluation to it, however it is often challenging to lead students to the epiphany that appears when they discover the ‘transformational passage’ that exists within their idea and chosen material. The lines from a recipe book cut and woven into the hat crocheted with fishing line spoke strongly of how this person needs directions to move forward, but once clear on the course, she takes it directly.

Educational psychologist Johan Postalozzi suggests that if intellectual activity can spring up side by side with love, this central force will clearly express the greatest ideal of human action. Any significant approach to learning will take basically a positive attitude toward human potential and change. Intuition and love can interact in three specific ways in a learning setting: “1) the sense of caring and intuitive sensitivity between teacher and student, 2) the love and intuitive feel for the act of learning or teaching, 3) love for a subject area that can be felt by both teacher and student.”¹⁹

Philosopher Ken Wilber writes on behalf of his passion for the coherent integration of human knowledge that “self-transcendence, which leaves no corner of the universe untouched, means nothing more—and nothing less—than that the universe has an intrinsic capacity to go beyond what went before.”²⁰ In its comprehensive inclusivity, Wilber’s theory realizes a sensible integration of the vast realms of human experience and endeavor and provides an understanding of “how we can become more fully human and at the same time be saved from the fate of being merely human.”²¹ The agony of education is that a university should be the institution most devoted and committed to the enterprise of transforming the human condition by calling for reform,

however it is too often the final holding place devoted to protecting the self seeking needs of professorial ambitions and elitist attitudes. Rather than empowering students to take up their voice and exercise their “capacity to criticize and reform”²² students feel very threatened by a professor’s ability to play for power over their lives through grades. Minority students who struggle against prejudice that is “entrenched as a general moral scheme that represents the basic values of the society²³ in which they live will find it that much more difficult to voice opposing opinions on any topic in or outside the classroom.

Mikhail Bakhtin writes the “gateway of the I is located at the center not only of one’s own existence but of language as well. This is because an intrinsic connection exists between the project of language and the project of selfhood. They both exist in order to mean.”²⁴ ‘Process Education’ is a pedagogical model devoted to giving students greater responsibility and ownership of their right to communicate and negotiate the assessment of their projects.

In *The Handbook for Cooperative Learning* published by the Pacific Crest Institute educators are guided towards creative situations where a group of students create positive interdependence and students working in teams accomplish a common goal. All members must cooperate to complete the task and there is individual and group accountability. Each team member is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping each other learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement rather than competition. Results of studies have shown “that the use of cooperative learning leads to improved academic achievement, improved attendance and retention, positive relationships among students and a sense of community.”²⁵ Such models of co-operative and collaborative learning can make great strides in eradicating the marginalized experience of the minority student, and all students at large. All of my Design Foundation classes function from the model of co-operative learning. Students learn to teach other (there is role reversal, students see themselves as teachers) and when you teach you learn better. Students also discover that their own life experiences are important and can contribute positively to the learning process.²⁶ Heidegger said the question of existence never gets straightened out except through existing itself.

“Without compassion for oneself and for others, without hope or humility, the possibility to change form remains unattainable. What is otherwise left to be changed is but masks.”²⁷ Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman believes “every liberal academic—not liberal in the sense of liberal vs. conservative, but in the sense of liberal arts—is an evangelist for wisdom. Is an evangelist for decency and compassion and ethics and should want to educate people to live a better life and to be a better person, to be more kind, to be more wise, more intelligent, and to understand the world better.”²⁸ Educators at every level have the privilege of a position that places them in authority over the development of minds at every stage of development, from young to old. Wilber believes, as do I, that “it is not the forces of darkness but of shallowness that everywhere threaten the true, and the good, and the beautiful.”²⁹ Each student is a deep and eternal mystery looking for guidance and a way forward. The subject matter found within their identity is the potential energy central to why education exists at all. They do not require that we have all the right answers, but they are hoping we might be able to guide them toward the meaningful questions to be asked.

NOTES

¹ Joe R. Feagin, Hernan Vera, and Nikitah Imani. *The Agony of Education: Black Students at White Colleges and Universities* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

² Feagin, et al., *The Agony of Education*, 18.

³ Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁴ Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, “Phylogenetic and Ontogenetic Functions of Artistic Cognition,” *The Arts, Cognition and Basic Skills* (1978): 115.

⁵ Csikszentmihaly, 115.

⁶ Csikszentmihaly, 117.

⁷ Csikszentmihaly, 120.

⁸ Csikszentmihaly, 121.

⁹ Nel Noddings and Paul J. Shore, *Awakening the Inner Eye: Intuition in Education*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Noddings and Shore, *Awakening the Inner*, 117.

¹¹ George Lakoff and Rafael Nunez. *Where Mathematics Comes From: How the Embodied Mind Brings Mathematics into Being*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000).



- 12 Noddings and Shore, *Awakening the Inner*, 58.
- 13 Noddings and Shore, *Awakening the Inner*, 58.
- 14 Noddings and Shore, *Awakening the Inner*, 60.
- 15 Csikszentmihalyi, 120.
- 16 Noddings and Shore, *Awakening the Inner*, 102.
- 17 Noddings and Shore, *Awakening the Inner*, 102.
- 18 Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*, (New York: Allworth Press, 1990).
- 19 Noddings and Shore, *Awakening the Inner*, 165.
- 20 Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution*, (Boston: Shambhala Press, 1995) .
- 21 Wilber, Introduction x.
- 22 Alberto Melucci, *The Playing Self: Person and Meaning in the Planetary Society*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- 23 Melucci, p. 33.
- 24 Michael Holquist, *Bakhtin and his World*, (London: Routledge, 1990).
- 25 Daniel Apple, Wendy Duncan-Hewitt, Karl Krumsieg, David Mount, *Handbook on Cooperative Learning*. (Corvallis, OR: Pacific Crest, 2000).
- 26 Apple et al., *Handbook on Cooperative*, 12.
- 27 Melucci, p.50.
- 28 Robert Thurman. 2004. *How to Live Forever* [online]. Beliefnet: An Interview with Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman. [cited 5 March 2004]. Available from World Wide Web: (http://www.beliefnet.com/story/141/story_14141.html)
- 29 Wilber, Introduction, xi.

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